

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK

REBECCA S.,

19-CV-01394-MJR
DECISION AND ORDER

Plaintiff,

-v-

ANDREW SAUL,
Commissioner of Social Security,

Defendant.

Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §636(c), the parties consented to have a United States Magistrate Judge conduct all proceedings in this case. (Dkt. No. 14)

Plaintiff Rebecca S.¹ ("Plaintiff") brings this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. §§ 405(g) and 1383(c)(3) seeking judicial review of the final decision of the Commissioner of Social Security ("Commissioner" or "defendant") denying her application for Disability Insurance Benefits ("DIB") and Supplemental Security Income ("SSI") pursuant to the Social Security Act (the "Act"). Both parties have moved for judgment on the pleadings pursuant to Rule 12(c) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. For the following reasons, Plaintiff's motion (Dkt. No. 10) is denied, defendant's motion (Dkt. No. 12) is granted, and the case is dismissed.

¹ In accordance with the District's November 18, 2020, Standing Order, plaintiff is identified by first name and last initial.

BACKGROUND²

Plaintiff filed protectively for DIB on December 2, 2015, and SSI on December 5, 2015, alleging a disability onset date of June 1, 2013, in both. (Administrative Transcript [“Tr.”] 228-229). The applications were initially denied on March 23, 2016. (Tr. 83-96). Plaintiff timely filed a request for an administrative hearing. (Tr. 97-99). A hearing was held before Administrative Law Judge Paul Georger., on August 16, 2018. (Tr. 32-58). Plaintiff appeared with counsel. A vocational expert also appeared. On October 1, 2018, the ALJ issued a decision finding Plaintiff not disabled through the date of the decision. (Tr. 11-31). On August 19, 2019, the Appeals Council denied Plaintiff’s request for review, making the ALJ’s decision final. (Tr. 1-6). This action followed.

DISCUSSION

I. Scope of Judicial Review

The Court’s review of the Commissioner’s decision is deferential. Under the Act, the Commissioner’s factual determinations “shall be conclusive” so long as they are “supported by substantial evidence,” 42 U.S.C. §405(g), that is, supported by “such relevant evidence as a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support [the] conclusion,” *Richardson v. Perales*, 402 U.S. 389, 401 (1971) (internal quotation marks and citation omitted). “The substantial evidence test applies not only to findings on basic evidentiary facts, but also to inferences and conclusions drawn from the facts.” *Smith v. Colvin*, 17 F. Supp. 3d 260, 264 (W.D.N.Y. 2014). “Where the Commissioner’s decision

² The Court presumes the parties’ familiarity with Plaintiff’s medical history, which is summarized in the moving papers.

rests on adequate findings supported by evidence having rational probative force,” the Court may “not substitute [its] judgment for that of the Commissioner.” *Veino v. Barnhart*, 312 F.3d 578, 586 (2d Cir. 2002). Thus, the Court’s task is to ask “whether the record, read as a whole, yields such evidence as would allow a reasonable mind to accept the conclusions reached’ by the Commissioner.” *Silvers v. Colvin*, 67 F. Supp. 3d 570, 574 (W.D.N.Y. 2014) (quoting *Sample v. Schweiker*, 694 F.2d 639, 642 (9th Cir. 1982)).

Two related rules follow from the Act’s standard of review. The first is that “[i]t is the function of the [Commissioner], not [the Court], to resolve evidentiary conflicts and to appraise the credibility of witnesses, including the claimant.” *Carroll v. Sec’y of Health & Human Servs.*, 705 F.2d 638, 642 (2d Cir. 1983). The second rule is that “[g]enuine conflicts in the medical evidence are for the Commissioner to resolve.” *Veino*, 312 F.3d at 588. While the applicable standard of review is deferential, this does not mean that the Commissioner’s decision is presumptively correct. The Commissioner’s decision is, as described above, subject to remand or reversal if the factual conclusions on which it is based are not supported by substantial evidence. Further, the Commissioner’s factual conclusions must be applied to the correct legal standard. *Kohler v. Astrue*, 546 F.3d 260, 265 (2d Cir. 2008). Failure to apply the correct legal standard is reversible error. *Id.*

II. Standards for Determining “Disability” Under the Act

A “disability” is an inability “to engage in any substantial gainful activity by reason of any medically determinable physical or mental impairment which can be expected to result in death or which has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of not less than twelve (12) months.” 42 U.S.C. §§423(d)(1)(A), 1382c(a)(3)(A). The Commissioner may find the claimant disabled “only if his physical or mental impairment

or impairments are of such severity that he is not only unable to do his previous work but cannot, considering his age, education, and work experience, engage in any other kind of substantial gainful work which exists in the national economy, regardless of whether such work exists in the immediate area in which he lives, or whether a specific job vacancy exists for him, or whether he would be hired if he applied for work.” *Id.* §§423(d)(2)(A), 1382c(a)(3)(B). The Commissioner must make these determinations based on “objective medical facts, diagnoses or medical opinions based on these facts, subjective evidence of pain or disability, and . . . [the claimant’s] educational background, age, and work experience.” *Dumas v. Schweiker*, 712 F.2d 1545, 1550 (2d Cir. 1983) (first alteration in original) (quoting *Miles v. Harris*, 645 F.2d 122, 124 (2d Cir. 1981)).

To guide the assessment of whether a claimant is disabled, the Commissioner has promulgated a “five-step sequential evaluation process.” 20 C.F.R. §§404.1520(a)(4), 416.920(a)(4). First, the Commissioner determines whether the claimant is “working” and whether that work “is substantial gainful activity.” *Id.* §§404.1520(b), 416.920(b). If the claimant is engaged in substantial gainful activity, the claimant is “not disabled regardless of [his or her] medical condition or . . . age, education, and work experience.” *Id.* §§404.1520(b), 416.920(b). Second, if the claimant is not engaged in substantial gainful activity, the Commissioner asks whether the claimant has a “severe impairment.” *Id.* §§404.1520(c), 416.920(c). To make this determination, the Commissioner asks whether the claimant has “any impairment or combination of impairments which significantly limits [the claimant’s] physical or mental ability to do basic work activities.” *Id.* §§404.1520(c), 416.920(c). As with the first step, if the claimant does not have a severe impairment, he or she is not disabled regardless of any other factors or considerations. *Id.*

§§404.1520(c), 416.920(c). Third, if the claimant does have a severe impairment, the Commissioner asks two additional questions: first, whether that severe impairment meets the Act's duration requirement, and second, whether the severe impairment is either listed in Appendix 1 of the Commissioner's regulations or is "equal to" an impairment listed in Appendix 1. *Id.* §§404.1520(d), 416.920(d). If the claimant satisfies both requirements of step three, the Commissioner will find that he or she is disabled without regard to his or her age, education, and work experience. *Id.* §§404.1520(d), 416.920(d).

If the claimant does not have the severe impairment required by step three, the Commissioner's analysis proceeds to steps four and five. Before doing so, the Commissioner must "assess and make a finding about [the claimant's] residual functional capacity ["RFC"] based on all the relevant medical and other evidence" in the record. *Id.* §§404.1520(e), 416.920(e). RFC "is the most [the claimant] can still do despite [his or her] limitations." *Id.* §§404.1545(a)(1), 416.945(a)(1). The Commissioner's assessment of the claimant's RFC is then applied at steps four and five. At step four, the Commissioner "compare[s] [the] residual functional capacity assessment . . . with the physical and mental demands of [the claimant's] past relevant work." *Id.* §§404.1520(f), 416.920(f). If, based on that comparison, the claimant is able to perform his or her past relevant work, the Commissioner will find that the claimant is not disabled within the meaning of the Act. *Id.* §§404.1520(f), 416.920(f). Finally, if the claimant cannot perform his or her past relevant work or does not have any past relevant work, then at the fifth step the Commissioner considers whether, based on the claimant's RFC, age, education, and work experience, the claimant "can make an adjustment to other work." *Id.* §§404.1520(g)(1), 416.920(g)(1). If the claimant can adjust to other work, he or she is

not disabled. *Id.* §§404.1520(g)(1), 416.920(g)(1). If, however, the claimant cannot adjust to other work, he or she is disabled within the meaning of the Act. *Id.* §§404.1520(g)(1), 416.920(g)(1).

The burden through steps one through four described above rests on the claimant. If the claimant carries his burden through the first four steps, “the burden then shifts to the [Commissioner] to show there is other gainful work in the national economy which the claimant could perform.” *Carroll*, 705 F.2d at 642.

III. The ALJ’s Decision

At step one, the ALJ found Plaintiff had not engaged in substantial gainful activity since June 1, 2013, the alleged onset date. (Tr. 16). At step two, the ALJ found that Plaintiff had the following severe impairments: degenerative disc disease of the cervical and lumbar spine with lumbar radiculopathy; migraine headaches; and obesity. (Tr. 17-16-17). At step three, the ALJ concluded that Plaintiff did not have an impairment or combination of impairments that met or medically equaled one of the listed impairments in 20 C.F.R. Part 404, Subpart P, Appendix 1. (Tr. 17). Prior to proceeding to step four, the ALJ determined that Plaintiff retained the RFC to perform light work as defined in the regulations “except she can frequently use ramps, stairs, ladders, ropes and scaffolds, and she can frequently balance, stoop, kneel, crouch and crawl.” (Tr. 17). At step four of the sequential evaluation, the ALJ concluded that Plaintiff is capable of performing her past relevant work as a Bus Monitor. (Tr. 24). Accordingly, the ALJ determined that Plaintiff has not been under a disability from June 1, 2013, through the date of the decision. (Tr. 25).

IV. Plaintiff's Challenge

Plaintiff argues that the ALJ erred and the case must be remanded, because the ALJ's RFC did not reflect limitations from Plaintiff's migraine headaches despite the ALJ's finding that such headaches constitute a severe impairment. The Court disagrees.

Contrary to Plaintiff's argument, the ALJ did consider Plaintiff's severe impairment of migraines in determining that Plaintiff could only perform light work. (Tr. 18-24). There was substantial evidence in the record supporting the ALJ's determination not to impose additional restrictions on Plaintiff's RFC based on her complaint of migraines. The record shows that Plaintiff routinely reported that her headaches were infrequent or that she had not experienced them at all. (Tr. 376, 403, 421, 434, 496, 500, 558, 562). Plaintiff's migraine symptoms were relieved with medication, which tends to show that they were not disabling. (Tr. 376, 378, 443, 560). Further, her activities of daily living were arguably inconsistent with her subjective complaint of debilitating migraines. (Tr. 48-49, 297-98, 301, 394, 411, 558). In sum, the ALJ assessed Plaintiff's migraines and based on substantial evidence in the record, concluded that no additional limitations should be included in the RFC. See *Cichocki v. Astrue*, 729 F.3d 172, 177 (2d Cir. 2013) ("Where an ALJ's analysis...regarding a claimant's functional limitations and restrictions affords an adequate basis for meaningful judicial review, applies the proper legal standards, and is supported by substantial evidence such that additional analysis would be unnecessary or superfluous, ... remand is not necessary merely because an explicit function-by-function analysis was not performed.").

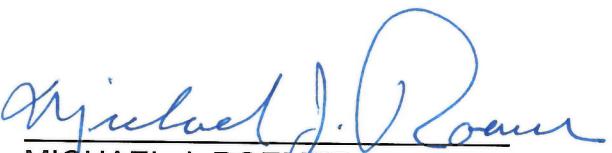
CONCLUSION

. For the above reasons, Plaintiff's motion for judgment on the pleadings (Dkt. No. 10) is denied, defendant's motion for judgment on the pleadings (Dkt. No. 12) is granted, and the case is dismissed.

The Clerk of Court shall take all steps necessary to close this case.

SO ORDERED.

Dated: February 23, 2021
Buffalo, New York


MICHAEL J. ROEMER
MICHAEL J. ROEMER
United States Magistrate Judge